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THE MODERN:

A FRAGMENT.

BY

CHARLES H. DIMMOCK.

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DEDICATION.

TO THE HON. WM. H. LYONS.

Dear Sir:

In dedicating this waif to yourself, I have secured its consideration, by connecting it with the name of my early friend; one who blending dignity and learning with elegance and courtesy, avoids modern innovation by increasing refinement, and polite petrefaction, by the active exercise of a warm and generous heart.

I am, dear sir,

Your sincere friend and admirer,

CHAS. H. DIMMOCK.

Richmond, Va., *Feb.* 1866.

PREFACE.

As the world progresses in the application of science and the elimination of the useful from the mechanic arts, it seems but to retrograde, or deteriorate, in those elements of taste which form our manners, determine our habits, and apparel our persons. It is but necessary to place these features in contrast, to be startled by their incongruity. Reason and Folly are so constantly seen in co-operation—one adorning the inner, the other the outer man—that a problem which would perplex Archimedes, is solved by some gentlemen with a hat only wanting the bells; while she whose unadorned beauty might prove irresistible, presents herself in such garb as should bring discredit on a Blanche of Devan.

In treating this subject, the heel of gravity can scarcely avoid the foot-step of humor, as ideas, however sedate, must promptly retire upon an intrusion of the grotesque or ludicrous.

A field so extensive as the title covers, would, if regularly passed over, have afforded fatigue rather than entertainment; it has been entered, therefore, at those points only, where the antithesis of flowers and weeds proved most conspicuous.

Attention may be diverted from our own deficiencies, by inviting a consideration of those of our neighbors; so imperfections in this composition may escape observation, in view of those it seeks to correct.

THE MODERN:

A FRAGMENT.

"O TEMPORA! O MORES!"—*Cicero.*

Arise, ye Muses! lend your favoring smile,
Embue the fancy, and inform the style
Of thy too feeble, all unworthy son,
Who aid implores, ere yet his task's begun!
An humble vot'ry kneels before your shrine:
Shall he in vain implore your power divine?
Will ye look down with unimpassioned faces
From that high peak? for there, they say, the place is
Where rest the Nine, in majesty serene,
On Hel'con's Mount, whence flows bright Hippocrene.
Will none bend down to light with face benign
My faltering verse—nor yet to intertwine
Some golden threads, whose brilliancy may tend
To shed a lustre upon what they mend?

The theme is such that Calliope's vein
Is now involved, and then Erato's strain,
While Thalia, muse with everlaughing face,
Whose kind assistance oft has turn'd disgrace
From poet's head, is of the gifted nine—
The last whose aid 'twere prudent to resign;
For modern poets, when with frenzy shaken,
And when their earnest prayers the Muses waken,

Seek Calliope's stately grace to gain,
And lead the van in her illustrious train.
As Philomela ne'er will consort be
To that pert bird we call the twittery,
High on the bending spray he's left alone,
With feeble pipe to twitter forth his song.
So, even so, 'tis with the lyric Muse,
Whose inspiration never can infuse
Heroic ardor, where the Gods see fit
To join with reason but a scanty wit.
A pensive sadness then becomes their mood,
Upon "the loves of Angels" then they brood;
At twilight dim, to cool sequestered groves,
Along the shore, their lonely fancy roves,
And every zephyr, as 'tis wafted by,
Floats slowly onward, laden'd with a sigh;
While prayers go up, as evening dews descend,
And sad Erato deigns her ear to lend.
Then soft as music o'er the water stealing,
Plaintive and low, as when the dove's revealing
From some high perch, on lone and deaden'd tree,
To listening ears his true love minstrelsy,
So gently first they pour their strain along,
Responsive echo ling'ring o'er the song.
Succeeding lines with amorous flame burn higher,
Soon, Phœnix-like, their verse is all afire,
Discretion fleeing leaves no power to save,
And frenzied lyrics find the Phœnix's grave.
Though in the ashes ardent verses lie,
Poetic ardor is not born to die;
Nor does defeat, though twice repeated, prove
One's all deficient in the art to move

In measur'd numbers, if by chance he hits
Upon some theme that with his fancy fits.
Perhaps in reading some effusion o'er—
Florid or grand, as he had writ before—
Suggestive laughter, stirr'd by failures past,
The theme auspicious may present at last:
Forgiving Thalia then his efforts crown,
For cold neglect can ne'er produce a frown,
When smiles, good-humored, both conspire to grace
The soft effulgence of the Muse's face.
Now happy hits and shapes the most fantastic,
Pleasing quips, with fancies Hudibrastic,
Pervade each verse and flit through every line,
Investing all with roseate hue divine;
Then sorrow reading banishes despair,
And joyous laughter smoothes the front of care.
Thus 'tis seen, e'en by the weakest eye
That e'er caught gnats, or suffer'd from a stye,
How much, in poesy, success depends
Upon the theme, and what discretion lends.
But as the bird, by gentle instinct taught,
Deserts her nest, when 'tis with danger fraught,
Along the ground on feeble pinion flies,
And luring onward, utters plaintive cries;
So has the reader been enticed along,
Forgot the theme and purpose of my song.
Impending ruin hap'ly lur'd away,
The bird returning, sings a joyous lay,
While scoffs and sneers, from belles and beaux remain,
To fright me off when I'd return again.
That ladies' frowns are fearful, all must own:
Pygmalion's mistress, carved from hardest stone,

Was sooner moved by love's transmuting power,
Than loveliest woman when her eye-brows lour.
Then sneers of beaux, sustain'd, and e'en made strong
By rank pomatum, prove how great the wrong,
When satire ruffles, with vandalic quill,
Their bob-tailed coats or their dulcinia's frill:
These, still disturbing, warn me not to pass,
As first the angel, backed by Balaam's ass.
Yet I must on, though hazardous it seem,
And seek, through dangers, my neglected theme.

Why, O ye Gods! in this enlightened day,
Does senseless Fashion hold so wide a sway?
As time advances and the world grows old,
That inane passion should at least grow cold,
Which prompts most men—alas! and women too—
To do—no matter—just as others do.
Amazed, we ponder feeble man when driven
From Eden's shade, anathematized by heaven!
Given him then, in sin's first natal hour,
Blent with the curse, was intellectual power,
The fairest boon kind Providence ere gave,
For man it rescued from dark Lethe's wave,
Where in oblivion, each successive race
Had sunk ignobly, and without a trace.
To mark a path, else impotently trod,
And vindicate the justice of Omniscient God,
Was reason sent, with power to loose or bind,
When varying judgment waver'd o'er the mind:
Instinct no longer, with uncertain hand,
Her trembling sceptre sway'd o'er all the land,

Divorced his legiance, man refused to yield
In low subjection, as the beasts of field,
A sentient being, *vide* martyr'd Paul,
The touchstone, reason, he applies to all;
Retains whate'er the ordeal has withstood,
And "all things proving holds to what is good."
This maxim's fitness not alone is seen
By lowly followers of the Nazarene,
Earth's children, earthy, have obey'd the rule,
Confirmed its dictates, save in Fashion's school,
Where sits the Goddess, wrapt in one idea—
That shifting modes should vary every year,
And peace and comfort close their placid eyes,
Devoted monthly for a change of guise.

Each rolling cycle, in the world's progression,
Brings arts and sciences some new accession;
Each sun returning lumines with its ray
Some thought immortal breaking into day;
Till man at last successfully has striven,
And, "like Prometheus, *snatch'd* the fire of heaven—"
He now commands; as Puck, it hastens forth,
"In forty minutes" girdling the earth.*

---

*Obe.— * * * * * * * * *
Fetch me this herb: and be thou here again,
Ere the Leviathan can swim a league.
Puck.—I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes.
Midsummer Night's Dream, Act II, Scene II.

The compensating fact that the telegraphic circle must soon accomplish *its round*, is plead in abatement for an assertion poetically premature.

Foam-crested ocean, whose resistless roll
Swept Canute's chair, defiant of control,
Impetuous, surging, on the lessening shore,
With angry chafing, and tumultuous roar,
Now rushing onward, meets, athwart its way,
Firm fronted walls, and dashes into spray;
While ships, protected from all former harms,
Close in the rear, lie laughing at the storms.
O'er mountain crest, and through the valley dim,
Across the torrent, round the broad lake's rim,
Surmounting all, the railroad winds its way
From densest shadow to the light of day.
The rugged cliff, a monument of time,
Opes for its course, as on from clime to clime,
With graceful curvings, steadily it tends,
And distant countries in one interest blends.
How short the time since that pale jet of steam
Pour'd startling fancies o'er young Fulton's dream!
Scarce fifty years have sped with comet's flight—
And, like the comet, left their trains of light—
Since first was seen, on Hudson's favor'd tide,
A little steamboat slowly onward glide.
In spite of wind, and ocean's mighty swell
On treacherous coasts, where direst haps befell
The hardy seaman, trusting to his sail,
Huge steamships ride, though adverse to the gale.
How Proteus-like the agency of steam!
It fells a forest, or it fells a seam.
With ready power, 'tis apt, on either hand,
To plough the ocean or to plough the land—
The ardent flame, whose fervor gave it birth,
'Tis used to quench, impelling water forth;

Hercules pales, in wonder of its deeds,
And Pan sits envious while it blows his reeds.*
The glowing furnace, with a ceaseless roar,
Pours bubbling masses of its fervid ore:
In rapid sequence, scarce with time to chill,
The ardent metal through the rolling-mill
Is borne along, till in the massive frame
Of pond'rous engine, driving o'er the main;
Or else returning to its native bed,
When pedant master brings it to his head,
In high estate to straddle o'er a nose,
Stern and *ironic* even in repose.
Thus, as Deucalion, peopling the world,
Infused existence in the stones he hurl'd,
So things inert, arise and quicken'd stand,
Instinct with impulse, passive at command,
Obedient ever to the lightest touch
Of man, whose reason has evoked them such.

Now Fashion's legions, shouldering for a place,
Come smirking forward, dizen'd out with lace;
Their dresses' colors, as the peacock's spread,
And wild profusion clust'ring on each head.
These tints of Iris that invest their forms,
Are but exponents of the inner storms,
Where radiant, glowing, transient tears depart,
Illum'd by sunshine that pervades the heart.

* It were enough to induce the old cloven-footed God to prick up his ears, trouble at the sonorous breathings of the organ inflated by steam power. How greatly must his vexation have increased, when saluted by steam-whistles, musical with the advice of "Get out of the way, Old Dan Tucker."

From earliest days—when waking with a start,
As France, poor Adam lost his *bony-part*—
The gentler sex have held it as a schism
In taste refined, not to out vie the prism.
For them bright insects were but *born to dye*,
And melt in crimson, that an azure eye
Should roll more beauteous, when love's ruddy hue
Is placed in contrast with the softer blue.
Perhaps the crest, no doubt his pleasing dapple,
Drew Eve's attention ere she bit the apple,
Induced a pause, he plied his subtle art—
The eye when captive, captivates the heart—
And trusting woman, lur'd by serpent wiles,
When eating, lost Heaven's promises and smiles.
Our humble Grandmas, in their modest youth,
Had lessons given, not of dress, but truth;
Arrayed in homespun, aprons seemly check'd—
The white and blue in alternation fleck'd—
They learned bright colors strip'd the silly clown,
The Indian's cheek, the strolling Gipsey's gown.
When recess came, the schooldame's ruffled cap
Was settled gently, to allure a nap;
And when queer faces, peeping thro' the door,
Saw stately ruffles fanning in her snore,
How quickly all appliances were found
For girlish frolick in its varied round.
Their rattling sticks 'gainst upright hoops were rung;
No dandy's rattan rapped them as they swung:
Each skipping foot the flying ropes pursue,
Nor fears the dust collecting on the shoe;
While envious thorn to tear in vain had striven,
As dresses then were not "*illusion given;*"

But formed of fabrics such as "Ida, dear,"
Or gentle mama, passes with a sneer;
Votes as plebeian what grandmother wore,
Declaring vulgar all her race before;
Soothes with a "poh!" antiquity to sleep,
Prefers a dress, perhaps one "*moire antique;*"
Or, in worse taste, selecting other tissue,
Superior cost is made the only issue.
Too fine for study, far too fine for play,
Absorbed in self and all her rich array,
The joys of childhood, vital but when free,
Will twine no garlands for her memory,
Will leave no taper, pendent mid the gloom,
With perfumed radiance for the days to come.
Considerate mother! leave the dear ones pure,
Nor dress nor make them women premature;
Disturb the fountain in its crystal flow,
And turbid waters mark the stream below:
Direct, don't change, the course by nature given;
The troubled surface yields no hues of heaven.

In better times, ere change became the passion,
And common sense was exiled for discretion,
Good Mistress Archer, with her Saxon face—
A modest bearing and an English grace—
Accomplished Misses, given to her care,
In mental beauties, now, alas! too rare.
Art meretricious, which to earnest life,
Is tinsel armor in the eager strife,
Pretending manner, artifice and guile,
Went down beneath the battery of her smile.

The empty simper, and the ardent gaze
From rolling eyes solicitous of praise;
The head thrown backward, as 'twere loth to go,
A lisping tongue, continuous in its flow
Of speech, consisting utterly of parts—
Ignoring rules fixed by grammatic arts—
These sadly fail in efforts to portray
The rising light of Madam Sansdupay;
Whose garish glare irradiates the spot
Where discreet learning tenanted a cot:
Now far remov'd, its meagre space is lost
Beneath a structure of the grandest cost;
Here Madam reigns, to spread both near and far,
Through halls adjacent, distant corridor,
The edict mighty, cloth'd in Gallic phrase,
And swell'd to raptures by her votive's praise,
That "French alone's the language given by Jove
For courtly parlance midst the Gods above!
In French kind Hermes gave to man his lore,
French Phoebus sung and reeling Bacchus swore!
Great Juno's dress gives the *imprimatgur*
To Paris fashions—all must follow her,
At least of women; and in fear to trench on
The queen's good taste, Diana blows a French-horn.
Cupid, once stupid, late has ceased to be,
He points his arrows with the *Fleur de lis*,
And foam-born Venus strolls Cythera's shore,
Her golden hair dressed *a la Pompadour*.
Will mortals then their grovelling tastes array?
No! yield they must and gracefully obey."
Obey they do, and Gallic modes prevail,
Infest our homes, our usages assail;

While Fashion dictates to each son and daughter,
To sputter French, and English only slaughter:
The madam, therefore, proudly stands confest,
Midst teachers modern, eminently best,
And views with wonder, how impertinence cool
Will hood-wink merit, and has fill'd her school.
An emulous throng she kindly deigns to fleece,
And gather tribute from her golden geese.
"Forbear! forbear," my gentle readers plead,
"Why this goose-story? we were led to read,
Coax'd from our sulks, robb'd of our morning passion,
In fond expectance of new hints on Fashion."
Delusive fancy, how thou dost beguile!
For sulk and passion only leave a smile?
Take back thy smile, and, in unbroken bulk,
Restore the passion and the peerless sulk;
For now tho' drapery of the sex I sing,
Devices new 'twere vain essay to bring.

In Hamlet, Shakspeare gloriously contends
"There's a divinity that shapes our ends:"
This moulding power, beneficent in skill,
Has changed to evil, if it lingers still,
Or else, perchance, some Chrysaor has wed,
And monster blendings from the union led.
Renowned Echidna, of the beauteous bust,
Below a serpent trailing in the dust,*

* This monster, represented to have sprung from the union of Chrysaor with Callirhoe, daughter of Oceanus, is described as a lovely woman to the waist, and a serpent in the lower part of her body.

Is scarce a compound more to be deplored
Than the last junction by the belles adored;
Where art and nature in such contact run,
The tub begins ere half the woman's done.
Enquiring men, with wonderment profound,
Beheld these figures in their morning round,
And vainly sought the mystery to unravel,
In books of history and mid tales of travel.
That stunning work of Brobdingnagian fame,
With Park, Perouse and Parley—mighty name!
Were all appeal'd to, but the wonder grew,
As none had seen and none the mystery knew.
One reading Pope, to mitigate despair,
Conceiv'd the problem found solution there,
Among the shapes that "Umbriel" had seen,
When slowly flitting through "the Cave of Spleen,"
Intently seeking, to secure the fair,
"Sighs, sobs and passions" for her ravish'd hair.
Of various changes, by the goddess made—
Dreadful as whisperings from the tomb-stone's shade—
Were living tea-pots, garrulous goose-pies,
Itinerant pipkins and a jar of sighs;
But these our reader passes, to discover
Forms like he sought, as leaves to one another,
Marks the resemblance, through the vap'rous cloud,
In "maids turn'd bottles," boisterous and loud
For corks, their frothy contents to retain,
From foaming mouths, all bubbling amain;
And with the issue, is the semblance still
To modern belles, when bubbling at will
Their dilute ideas, in a current rapid,
Replete with nonsense, to depletion vapid,

Until in silence, mute as empty storks,
They stand Calypsos—all for want of corks.
Yet truest seeming proves, at times, fallacious;
Perhaps sincere, of honesty tenacious,
The fair resolv'd no doubting should exist,
Nor men go straying in a vap'rous mist;
And therefore, each, the outer skirt upraising
With dextrous grace, as to avoid the paving,
Display those circles, whose elastic swell
Defied the curious, puzzled all so well.
Surging, rolling, with a billowy motion,
These desperate *breakers* on life's troubled ocean,
Successful still o'er man and nature sweep,
While opposition sinks beneath the deep
Of their resolve, to do just as they please,
And be a tub, from waist below the knees.
To quiet all the invincibles declare,
As with a whirl they *vorticise* the air,
"The cynic master who a monarch scorn'd,
His lower person ever thus adorn'd;
We love his boldness, and admire the notion,
But then we women must have locomotion;
So compromising, which all trouble saves,
We take the hoops and leave behind the staves."
The classic thus, so fluent in their trains,
Demands no labour from unwilling brains.

Where are those textures that once draped the form
With flexile ease, and lent a nameless charm
To every movement, gave each calm recline
The graceful tortions of the clouds' outline,

When gently floating to their rest at even,
They sink in beauty 'neath the western heaven?
Where those tintings, modest and refined,
In mute expression of the wearer's mind,
Suffusing all that elegance retained,
Refinement sought, taste unobtrusive gained,
Ere vitiate fancy, mingling hues amiss,
Conspicuous glowed in marked antithesis?
An honour'd few, midst fashion's throng unknown—
As gentler plants by flaunting weeds o'ergrown—
Retain those vestures reason only claims,
And turn from dress to less ignoble aims.
The bustling legion, ever prone to change,
From nature, beauty take a wider range,
Extend their charter to the extremest verge
That humour, envy, arrogance can urge;
Expatiate freely in the untrammel'd code,
"*Tout est droit, si tout est a la mode!*"
Sustain'd by "Fortune, who so blindly sheds
Her brightest halo round the weakest heads,"
Unbounded ardour, kindling envy's fire,
Invades each bosom, pulsant with desire,
By force of wealth, to lead in the array
Of fool-born splendour, gilding wit's decay:
So vegetation frequently will show
Decomposition, by phosphoric glow,
And minds, contracting, twinkle mid display,
Dimmed by contrasting with the borrowed ray.

Pedestrian plebs move briskly o'er the stones,
Or bide the miseries of disjointed bones!

My dear old totterer, hasten on thy way!
See Tullia's chariot in that bright coupe.
One revolution of those rapid wheels
Had brought thy head beneath the iron heels,
But fortune, favoring, intervenes the space
Of just one door; my lady stops for lace.
The ready shopman, standing on the curb,
In "doing, suffering," literally a verb,
Swings back the pannel, blazon'd with her crest—
Heraldic honours, novel as grotesque.
Ere borne by wealth upon an affluent tide,
Her frugal father once had dignified
An armless coat; the daughter seals her charms,
That wait delivery, with a coat of arms.
Not to digress—She condescends to stoop,
Begirt by gewgaws and rotund in hoop,
Adjusting shakes, while moving to the door,
Her varying folds into exact contour,
And on the threshold pausing, we may scan
This timid, trusting, "help meet" of poor man;
As fashion'd by the most approved design,
And farthest ranging from the form divine.
The head, at first, demands our epic art—
Who storms a fortress seeks the weakest part—
With that as this, an increase of array
Excites suspicion it would fain allay.
Like most her sex, our lady's chiefest pains
Has been to dress the outside of her brains:
Mark the result—a bonnet, tiny hull!
Fit measure for the contents of her skull—
Benignly spreads its modicum of shade,
To shield from sunburn a luxuriant braid,

Which last year crown'd a buxom Tyrolese,
Who, venal, clipped it for more bread and cheese;
Saving this grace, we truly might declare
That "*beauty draws us with a single hair.*" *
If sorrows rarely come by single file,
In compensation duplex joys beguile:
As wit transcendent seldom rules alone,
But Turk-like, finds a brother near the throne.
So motley, tinsel, cap and silver bell,
Once worn aright, what symphonies would swell!
A mighty throng, of every age and station,
Would join the general tintinnabulation:
Upon reflection this, perchance, we hear,
When conscious of "a ringing in the ear."
To other belles, however, now we turn,
Who dress their heads, as friendship does the urn
Of those departed, or as some erect
A costly mansion for outside effect;
Within whose walls vacuity prevails,
And vainly sought, each solid comfort fails.
Where modest virtue ceases to preside,
And whimsey dictates to insensate pride,
Fitness, accord, discrimination clear,
Appointing all things to their proper sphere,
Instruct no longer—thus we see a bonnet,
Its sphere the head, yet scarcely resting on it;
Gaping it spreads each ribbon and each frill,
As though the contents were a bitter pill,
Or else the cobra's head it may appear,
Baffled in effort to engulf a deer.
Our eyes descending sweep the India shawl,
Rifled, perhaps, at holy Benares's fall,

*Pope's Rape of the Lock.

When Hastings borrowed, with the kind intent
Of confiscating what the Rajah lent:
Its history recks not—as Genevra slept,
It may have lain forgotten, so accept
This supposition for its brilliance now,
Or else discredit rests upon the brow
Of she who knows, besides who's very sure
The cost, which proves, was six hundred or more.
That patient wanderer on the trackless plain,
May in this vesture see no point of pain;
His hirsute sides has to her suit ne'er given
One pliant hair—hard cruel hands have riven:
The spurious fabric rests not on his pack—
A "last feather on the camel's back"—
But uncomplaining, he whose books will show
How fortune's tide can ebb, as well as flow;
Whose assets minus—debts a heavy plus—
Bear sadly down, a crushing incubus;
His is the load, as face and form assert,
He wears that shawl and 'tis a Nessos shirt.
Now to the dress—its lengthen'd trail restrain'd,
Swells from the pave and sweeps in grand disdain;
The ample folds with liberal measure roll,
Tug at the waist, rebellious of control,
Resisting still, the art that would assert
Twelve ample widths essential for a skirt;
Whose length excessive, by festoons pastoral,
Avoids the mud to show the new "balmoral"—
As, by an axiom of the subtle throng,
"To be too short a dress must be too long."
Conjecture only can present the cause
Why hoops increase by one of fashion's laws—

They seem constructed, as it were, to prove
In just what *circles* one may chance to move;
And coextensive with our Tullia's girth,
Her claims extend to fashionable birth.
The closing door concludes this brief survey,
While contemplation, sadden'd, turns away
To better days, when virtue sought to bind,
By all the graces of a polished mind,
And shuddering, fled the seeming wantonness
That gained attention by conspicuous dress.

How vain the effort to correct the schools
"Of such as pay to be reputed fools!"
Whose dwindled souls with grief are sicklied o'er,
When the last change comes somewhat premature,
Compels seclusion, till their dire distress
Can from the tailor find a fit redress.
These then we leave—in life's short, fitful reign,
All find their grief, and their allotted pain,
But compound miseries blend their powers to ban
The fever'd days of fashion's favor'd man:
Hence tender pity shields the passive head,
By folly's forms and folly's daughters led—
As ape by spinsters, in another sphere,
Whose crime has been to die unwedded here.

Shall Fashion rule, untouched by Reason's aid,
Till time shall cease, and earth in chaos fade?
From woman's hand, the cure should be deriven—
The last on earth must nearest be to heaven;
And she who led from Eden's fair domain,
By virtuous conduct should its paths regain.

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